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ABSTRACT

The area of subjective well-being has been and continues to be of interest to gerontologists. This study examined life satisfaction of older adults within the milieu of a classic, sociological community setting, Middletown, U.S.A. Data were gathered from 400 telephone interviews with respondents who were 60 years or older in the Muncie/Delaware County, Indiana area. Life satisfaction, measured as contact with confidant, loneliness, subjective health status, and subjective satisfaction with income were assessed. In the main, the older adult respondents appeared to have high levels of contact and interaction. They seemed to be rather satisfied with life in the present, and with life now as compared to the past, as well as with their income. Levels of loneliness tended to be on the low side. Those who were satisfied with life now as compared to the past tended to be married and in better health. Those who were less lonely tended to be more satisfied with life now than in the past, married, in better health, and to have sufficient contact with a confidant. Those who had sufficient contact with a confidant tended to be married and in better health. Those who were more satisfied with their incomes tended to be in better health. Income satisfaction was related to being married. Overall, it seemed that the role of subjective health status, lack of loneliness, contact with a confidant, satisfaction with income and satisfaction with life now as compared to the past were directly related to life satisfaction. (ABL)

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# LIFE , HEALTH AND LIFE SATISFACTION IN MIDDLETOWN, U.S.A.

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# INTRODUCTION

In its broader terms, the area of "subjective well-being" has been and continues to be of interest to gerontologists. Indeed, one of the many facets of this on-going attention is the fact that subjective well-being encompasses a number of definitions e.g. Morale, Happiness or Life Satisfaction (George 1979).

The general objective of this paper is to examine life satisfaction within the milieu of a classic, sociological community setting: Middletown, U.S.A. More specifically, much of our interest lies in examining the place of subjective health evaluations and life satisfaction.

While Middletown has received the attention of the Lynds and much later, Caplow and company (1982, 1983), little has been systematically written or researched regarding its older citizens per se. As such, that is where we will focus our present discussion.

Hopley noted that inconsistent use of the term (life satisfaction) by gerontologists tends to cloud the issue. The resulting confusion makes it as difficult to find the answer to the question "what is life satisfaction," as it has been to capture the elusive definition of intelligence.

Osberg, et al (1987) for example have examined "Quality of Life" which is composed of life satisfaction, satisfaction with social relationships, subjective health assessments and

satisfaction with finances. The latter three items are often employed as independent variables in anayses of life satisfaction.

Larson's oft cited work (1978) demonstrated that there are a wide variety of ways to gauge subjective well-being. The work of Hoyt and Creech (1983) and Liang (1984;1988) have critiqued and reevaluated classic measures such as LSIA. Diener (1984) has also extensively examined measures of subjective well-being.

With regard to accounting for a sense of well-being, the literature seems to indicate that in varying degrees, health makes a major contribution, as does income and quality of contact and interaction, and level of social activities. The influence of sex is still debated. Usui, Keil and Durig (1985) found that a significant component of life satisfaction for older adults is how well off an individual feels as compared to someone to whom he or she feels close. Life satisfaction seemed to be more affected by relative income than health or social participation. However, it should noted that relative income, household size, social participation, sex and health were all significant variables in explaining life satisfaction among older adults in that study.

## METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

The data were obtained from 400 telephone interviews with respondents who were 60 or older (for those interested in the

relative merits of different interview approaches, see Leinbach, 1982). A "Middletown Area Survey" is conducted annually by the Department of Sociology at Ball State University. The sample was selected by computer, utilizing a program which chooses phone numbers based on the proportion of exchanges and blocks which are in service throughout the Muncie/Delaware County area. This comprises the boundaries of contemporary Middletown.

Once contact was made with a household, a filter item was asked to determine if anyone in that household was 60 years of age or older. If an older adult was present, we proceeded to conduct the interview. If not, the ineligible respondent was thanked for their time and inconvenience, and the next number on the list was then called.

A number of the items in the instrument were taken from either Caplow's Middletown III study (the Kinship Survey) or the Commission on Aging Survey, a complete copy of which may be found in Babbie (1986). Some of the items were slightly modified for use in a telephone survey. For the sake of parsimony, life satisfaction was assessed by a single item measure. Diener (1984) has noted that despite the advantage of brevity, there some legitimate concerns about single item measures. On the other hand, such meaures usually correlate with external variables and do not seem to be especially contaminated by social desirability. As Deiner noted, the validity and reliability of the "single-item scale" is such that they are adequate if a very brief measure of global well-

being is what the researcher requires. The final instrument was subjected to a pilot test before the data collection process was begun. The general characteristics of the sample are seen in Table 1.

(Insert Table 1 Here)

## OBSERVATIONS

How do these older adults evaluate their levels of interaction with family, friends, and neighbors? Is there a pervasive sense of loneliness abroad in the land?

(Insert Table 2 Here)

It would appear that older Middletowners visit a good deal. Almost 79.0 percent visit with a friend or neighbor at least once a week. Some 65.0 percent visit everyday or a few times a week.

The responses shown in Table 3 indicate that a vast majority (76.0 percent) of older Middletowners have contact with someone they trust or in whom they can confide.

(Insert Table 3 Here)

Does life in general inflict a pervasive sense of loneliness upon our subjects? The data in Table 4 would say "no." When asked how often they feel lonely, 59.0 percent responded "never or hardly ever," about 17.0 percent said "fairly often," "very often or always."

(Insert Table 4 here)

Table 5 portrays levels of satisfaction with life and health. On life satisfaction, 75.0 percent responded

Excellent or Good. Nearly 64.0 percent stated that the health was Excellent or Good.

(Insert Table 5 Here)

The degree of "Comparative Life Satisfaction" is seen in Table 6. Comparative life satisfaction is a more temporal measure; that is, we were interested in not only life satisfaction at this point in time, but also in an assessment of now as compared to the past (young adulthood). Almost 37.0 percent said that they were more satisfied now than when they were young adults; 37.0 percent said, about the same and slightly over 25.0 percent said that they were less satisfied.

Finally, we asked about level of satisfaction with income. The data in Table 7 shows that a little over 80.0 percent of the sample answered that their income was at least adequate for their needs. This subjective assessment of income will be used in the following analysis rather than amount of income in dollars. Satisfaction with income showed a much stronger correlation at the zero order and in the multiple regression analysis than did actual income.

Initially, a rather large number of variables were examined in order to uncover those independent variables which help explain life satisfaction among older Middletowners. Early on, it appeared that degree of religious activity and involvement in hobbies and crafts played some role. However,

further analysis demonstrated that these variables explained very little of the total variance.

Multiple regression analysis (see Table 8) indicated that five variables contributed the most to an explanation of life satisfaction; they are SUBJECTIVE HEALTH STATUS, which the most significant effect of all the variables considered; COMPARATIVE LIFE SATISFACTION; SUFFICIENT CONTACT WITH A CONFIDANT; DEGEE OF LONELINESS; and finally INCOME SATISFACTION. The multiple correlation coefficient R = .58; $R^2$ = .327. It is interesting to note that amount of contact with friends and neighbors, and amount of income were <u>not</u> significantly related to life satisfaction.

(Insert Table 8 Here)

The model in Figure 1 shows the interrelationships between the five major variables in conjunction with MARITAL STATUS and SEX OF RESPONDENT. While marital status and sex showed no direct effects on life satisfaction, it was hypothesized that they might have indirect effects on the other main independent variables.

(Insert Figure 1 Here)

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In the main, the older adult respondents in Middletown appear to have high levels of contact and interaction. Also, they indicate seem to be rather satisfied with life now, and

with life now as compared to the past, as well as with their income. Levels of loneliness tend to be on the low side.

From the analysis in Figure 1, we see that those who are satisfied with life now as compared to the past, tend to be married and in better health; those who are less lonely tend to be more satisfied with life now than in the past, married, in better health, and have sufficient contact with a confidant.

Those who have sufficient contact with a confidant tend to be married and in better health. Those who are more satified with their incomes tend to be in better health; Income satisfaction is related to being married.

Interestingly, sex is related to marital status only. Not too surprisingly, older men tend to be married and not widowed more often than do older women.

Overall, it seems that the role of subjective health status, lack of loneliness, conact with a confidant, satifaction with income and satisfaction with life now as compared to the past (or lack of dissatisfaction if you prefer) are directly related to life satisfaction.

With regard to COMPARATIVE LIFE SATISFACTION (life now as compared to the past), we might hypothesize that those who

feel that life has not dealt them a particularly bad hand over time tend to feel that life in the later stages of the lfie cycle is not all that bad. On the other hand, especially for those who feel that things have gotten worse over time, the old statement that "It's hell to grow old" may have a bitter ring of reality. At this point in one's life, there may not be all that much time remaining for things to get better than they were.

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**Table 1: Background Characteristics of the Sample**

| MARITAL STATUS | N | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Married | 211 | 52.8 |
| Widowed | 145 | 36.3 |
| Separated/Divorced | 31 | 7.8 |
| Never Married | 13 | 3.3 |
| TOTAL | 400 | 100.0 |

| NUMBER OF LIVING CHILDREN | N | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| None | 65 | 16.3 |
| One | 66 | 16.5 |
| Two | 93 | 23.3 |
| Three | 78 | 19.5 |
| Four | 43 | 10.8 |
| Five | 17 | 4.3 |
| Six | 19 | 4.8 |
| Seven or more | 19 | 4.8 |
| TOTAL | 400 | 100.0 |

| AGE OF RESPONDENT | | |
|---|---|---|
| 60-64 | 121 | 30.5 |
| 65-69 | 103 | 25.9 |
| 70-74 | 72 | 18.1 |
| 75-79 | 59 | 14.9 |
| 80-84 | 30 | 7.6 |
| 85 and over | 12 | 3.0 |
| TOTAL | 397 | 100.0 |

| SEX OF RESPONDENT | | |
|---|---|---|
| Male | 133 | 33.3 |
| Female | 267 | 66.8 |
| TOTAL | 400 | 100.0 |

| LEVEL OF EDUCATION | | |
|---|---|---|
| No High School | 65 | 16.3 |
| Some High School | 87 | 21.9 |
| H.S. Grad/Trade Sh | 152 | 38.2 |
| Some College | 26 | 6.5 |
| College Grad or More | 68 | 17.1 |
| TOTAL | 398 | 100.0 |

| HOUSEHOLD INCOME | | |
|---|---|---|
| $0-4,999 | 42 | 13.0 |
| $5,000-9,999 | 96 | 29.6 |
| $10,000-14,999 | 55 | 17.0 |
| $15,000-19,999 | 35 | 10.8 |
| $20,000 and over | 96 | 29.6 |
| TOTAL | 324 | 100.0 |

**Table 2: How Often Did Respondent Visit In Person With Friends or Neighbors Last Week?**

| | N | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Everyday | 67 | 16.8 |
| A Few Times a Week | 194 | 48.6 |
| Once a Week | 53 | 13.3 |
| Not At All | 85 | 21.3 |
| TOTAL | 399 | |

**Table 3: Does Respondent Have as Much Contact As They Wish With Someone They Trust or Confide In?**

| | N | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 299 | 75.5 |
| No | 97 | 24.5 |
| TOTAL | 396 | |

**Table 4: How Often Does Respondent Find Themselves Feeling Lonely?**

| | N | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Never or Hardly Ever | 236 | 59.3 |
| Sometimes | 94 | 23.6 |
| Fairly Often | 28 | 7.0 |
| Very Often or Always | 40 | 10.1 |
| TOTAL | 398 | |

**Table 5: Respondent's Life Satisfaction and General Health**

| | Excellent | | Good | | Fair | | Poor | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| How would you describe your general satisfaction with life at the present? | 106 | 26.6 | 194 | 48.7 | 85 | 21.4 | 13 | 3.3 |
| Would you say that your health today is: | 88 | 22.0 | 166 | 41.5 | 111 | 27.8 | 35 | 8.8 |

**Table 6: Comparative Life Satisfaction Over Time**

| | More Satisfied | | About the Same | | Less Satisfied | | Don't Know | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Looking back, would you say that you are more or less satisfied with life <u>now</u> than when you were a young adult? | 143 | 36.8 | 144 | 37.0 | 99 | 25.4 | 3 | 0.8 |

**Table 7: Degree of Satisfaction with Income**

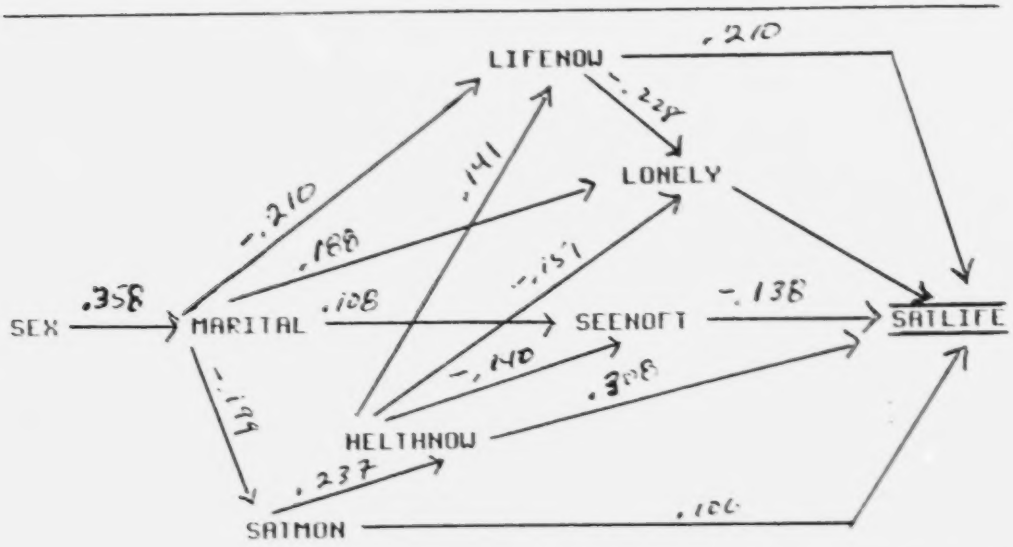
| | Very Well | | Well | | Adequately | | Not Very Well | | Barely | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| How well do you think your income and assets meet your financial needs? | 58 | 14.7 | 82 | 20.8 | 177 | 44.8 | 53 | 13.4 | 25 | 6.3 |

**Table 8: Multiple Regression Analysis of Life Satisfaction**

| VARIABLE | BETA | E | SIG |
|---|---|---|---|
| Subjective Health Status (HELTHNOW) | .308 | 46.11 | <.001 |
| Comparative Life Satisfaction (LIFENOW) | .204 | 19.52 | <.001 |
| Contact with Confidant (SEENOFT) | -.138 | 9.48 | <.01>.001 |
| Degree of Loneliness (LONELY) | -.135 | 7.74 | <.01>.001 |
| Income Satisfaction (SATMON) | .105 | 5.51 | <.05>.01 |

$R = .58$ $R^2 = .327$

Figure 1




R = .5824 $R^2$ = .3390 All Betas Significant at .05 or less